

FROM SKELETONS TO ORCHARDS

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This thesis is a creative work that is segmented into three main phases in order to display the developing poetic growth and control in the work of Paul Andrew Thies.

The first phase is titled “Skeletons and Rhinoceri.” It was a phase where I focused on more classical forms of poetry, namely accentual and syllabical sonnets. This phase was greatly influenced by both Charles Baudelaire and William Butler Yeats.

The second phase, titled “Clandestines,” was one in which I tried to develop a more dense form. Lord Byron and Pablo Neruda were the two main influences on my work at this time, largely in terms of imaginative exoticism and figurative energy.

The third section of this thesis, titled “Graffiti in the Orchard,” is an exploration of my current work as a poet. In this phase, Rainer Maria Rilke was the primary influence as I began to develop a more fluid and expressive style.

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PREFACE

Among the various titles I could choose for my thesis, one that would accurately capture the spirit of my endeavors might be something like "Stealing Dad's Car and Learning to Drive." This metaphor seems appropriate to my work, as my earliest attempts to take part in the daunting tradition of poetry left me, a novice, feeling like a transgressor, or thief. It was only later, as I continued to develop my skills, that I began to feel that I really belonged in the poetic tradition that I was studying. In surveying my development as a poet, it is these two thoughts that stand out.

I've segmented my thesis into three main sections that are representational of my poetic development, and as you read through the poems that I've selected for your review, I believe you will see greater growth and control with each successive section. This preface is intended to accompany the poems, in order to provide some insight into my thinking, as well as to share with you the impact of those poetic forefathers who I studied while evolving my aesthetic.

In the first chapter, which I have titled "Skeletons and Rhinoceri" (in honor of an abandoned book project), I tried my hand at composing more classical forms of poetry, namely accentual and syllabical sonnets. This section was greatly influenced by the works of both Charles Baudelaire and William Butler Yeats.

The second chapter, titled "Clandestines", was one in which I was highly interested in developing my own dense and tersely structured format. This emphasis on technical style led me to generate a four-line form, with the first three lines being eight syllables in length and the fourth line being twelve syllables in length. During the composition period of this section, I was reading a lot of Lord Byron and Pablo Neruda, whose influences on my work at this time were largely in terms of imaginative exoticism and figurative energy, and less on actual poetic form.

Finally, the third chapter of this thesis, titled "Graffiti in the Orchard", is an exploration of my current work as a poet. Having abandoned the four-line form as too stifling and inconclusive, I looked to Rainer Maria Rilke for inspiration and instruction as I began to develop a more fluid and expressive style.

Skeletons and Rhinoceri

The idea for this section originally began as a book-length project of poetry. My intention was to write and collect the various poems and anecdotes that I had been composing at that time and turn them into something publishable. While that never happened, I did begin a crucial turning point in my development and started to view poetry more as a discipline and less as only a vehicle for personal expression.

The title, "Skeletons and Rhinoceri", stems from an engraving by Albrecht Durer in which he had illustrated the skeleton of a man standing alongside a rhinoceros. I'm not sure what his motivation was, but my imagination was captured by the image, its unusual association of ideas. Unfortunately indicative of my temperament and lack of organized artistic direction during this time, I never fully articulated why I had chosen the image of skeletons and rhinos to rally around.

During those early days, I was particularly fascinated by the element of aesthetic distance in certain poems by Yeats that I found influential. A specific example that immediately comes to mind is *Lapis Lazuli*, in which the three carved Chinamen come to symbolize the artist coolly disinterested (or detached) from the ordinary world of King Billy bomb-balls, in order to allow for a deeper exploration of things that might otherwise be uncomfortable or difficult to examine or comment on. By maintaining aesthetic distance, the artist is able to see things that might not otherwise be available to his or her understanding of a situation, and is hence given a kind of control over that situation.

It was this same control that I sought in my own work. But I was also drawn to the terseness of Yeats' lines, which can be very tight and compact, like little explosions waiting to go off. In several of my earlier poems, such as *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Il Penseroso*, I think that the influence of Yeats' lines can be seen somewhat clearly. Poems such as these attempted to adopt that highly wrought, classically minded language of Yeats. He was the first example that I looked into with great interest of how to write within the confines of metrical poetry, to make the structure and discipline enhance the art.

During this time, however, I was also beginning to study the work of Charles Baudelaire with great interest. The attraction to Baudelaire for me at that time was his sensibility and mood, as well as his status as a damned, rebellious poet. Baudelaire has been called the first urban poet, and his modernity was a stark contrast to the Gaelic sensibility I had grown used to in Yeats. Plus, I was attracted to his outsider status. He was an example of someone who had chosen to ignore what the world may have chosen for his lot in life, and instead was consumed with his work. In the end, Baudelaire's refusal to accept the pressures and demands placed on him by family and society destroyed him, but his stubborn dedication to literature allowed him to burn very brightly as a poet before the fall.

Baudelaire began to exert an immediate influence on my poetry, and several early poems of mine came during a transition phase when I began to model Baudelaire's work, instead of Yeats'. One sensibility that I had picked up from Baudelaire was a slightly sarcastic and undermining sense of humor that I attempted to incorporate into my own work. Another posture that I adopted from Baudelaire was the futility of human relationships in constructing anything of cosmic permanency (a stance I have since disavowed as too shallow, given the depth of true human feeling that I have been instructed in by my wife and daughter, naturally, but also through the poetry of Rilke).

There is also a sensual aspect to Baudelaire's work that appealed to me. Through my studies, I learned that Baudelaire's primary relationship between women and his poetry, for instance, particularly Jeanne Duval, Apollonie Sabatier and Marie Daubrun, was to seek out the kernel of spiritualized physical beauty from their being and exploit it in iconographic and sensual terms. However, in Baudelaire's work there is an internal conflict between his natural feeling towards sensuality and his intellectual coldness which tries to remove beauty to an elevated and, truthfully, somewhat sterile plain of iconic grandness. Baudelaire could not resolve the two halves.

Spiritualized physical beauty is the effort to take a woman's physical, sensual attributes and influences and turn them into a transcendent, mythological power. I bought into this aesthetic, but I did not embrace Baudelaire's cold and sterile mythologizing. To me, a woman's physical beauty is to be celebrated as a touchable quality. I was attracted to such an attempt as Baudelaire's to spiritualize physical beauty, but I have a natural inclination towards greater intimacy and realism.

As this phase of my development drew to a close, I returned somewhat to the wrought and mannered language that marked my earlier compositions. At this point, I feel that I had achieved a balance between the influences of Yeats and Baudelaire on my writing, and tried to combine the two sensibilities into one.

I gradually became aware of how uncomfortable I was in using somewhat classically minded metrical techniques. Though I was attempting to incorporate meter into my poetry to achieve a more rigorous and disciplined form, I was unhappy with the process and the results. I felt stifled by it, as it took up too much of my focus. Some later poems of this first phase of development were excursions away from metrical concerns and, while perhaps not my strongest work, felt more comfortable to me in the writing process. I suspected that my strengths as a poet lay not in rigorous, metrical executions, but instead in free form. However, I made a commitment to try to find a balance between

a disciplined approach to writing and creating a new form that would allow some relaxation of expression. From this commitment came the next phase of my development.

Clandestinies

I began to conceive of creating a new short form of poetry that would serve as little poetic snapshots. The intent was to have a form that would flash a brief illustration that would require the reader to accept the challenge of focused engagement. Similar to haiku, but also intended to have a more Western flavor, this short four-line form was syllabic in nature, with the first three lines being eight syllables in length and the fourth and final line being twelve syllables in length. The fourth line was also to serve as an aesthetic exclamation point to the preceding three lines.

The reason that this form held an attraction for me was that it still spoke to my desire to work within a structure, but at the same time to have the ease of working syllabically, rather than accentually. The dense quality of this form was also intended to engage the reader by what it does not reveal. At this point in my development, I began to understand that poetry is as much about silence as it is about words and images. The terseness that I sought in the four-line form was to challenge the reader to take what was given and fill in the blanks.

In composing these little poems, there was also a greater emphasis on my part to explore a more philosophical aspect of my writing, and to escape the mannered style I was laboring under. If nothing else, these little poems facilitated my joy in writing, and kept it going.

Lord Byron's work had a profound influence on my imagination at that time, particularly his *Turkish Tales*. In Byron, I saw a deep and genuine feeling of love and respect for existence coupled with an attractive combination of exoticism, roguishness

and charm. His work was less solemn than Yeats and more affirming and fun-loving than Baudelaire's. Byron's poetry resisted the internalness and reticence that I saw in Baudelaire. Even in those moments when he looked internally, as for example, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron was a poet whose expressions were more positively engaged with life.

Byron's fascination with exoticism led me to become more exploratory of the influences of foreign cultures, especially the poetry of Pablo Neruda. The first book of Neruda's that I went wild over was *The Captain's Verses*. Neruda's work was very different from the other poets that I had studied, and I found his poetry to be liberated and engaging.

So, as I began to direct the composition of these small, four-line poems, I attempted to create a hybridization of Byron and Neruda's sensibilities, along with the ghosts of Yeats and Baudelaire. I eventually composed 104 of these small poems, and the subject matter, humor and emotional focus of this work were sometimes as varied as the four poets mentioned above.

Graffiti in the Orchard

The idea surrounding my interest in "orchard" is that everything in our world is alive, an orchard of immanent beings. Everything is some form of "being" -- everything is an expression of "everything". "Orchard" also suggests the creation myths regarding the Original Garden (Eden, etc.) -- maybe we never left the Garden of Eden, we just lost our sense of the world as immanent. The first purpose that I had in conceptualizing my current phase of poetic development was to mend the rift between the sensual and the ethereal. We have never left the Garden of Eden: we only lost our sense of it -- we lost the ability to recognize that the Garden is exactly where we still are. Animals are still in

the Garden because they have no conception of time and are thus in eternity -- outside of time. The Garden is eternity, the Garden is outside of time.

My interest in graffiti is that it leaves a mark of personal identity behind -- a street-level marking of territory. A lot of times it is painted over almost as soon as it goes up -- either by civically responsible people or by other graffiti artists. It tends to be a fleeting vehicle for expression. It is also a charming medium in that it is surrounded in struggle and can be beautiful and mischievous. I particularly admire those graffiti artists who take a real passion in their work and create something that shows care, attention and craftsmanship, in spite of its fleetingness.

If the Orchard is a place where time does not exist, then what is the nature of Graffiti in that place? What does its ephemerality amount to? In other words, is there an obtainable and sustainable place as to be "in the moment", a place where time and art are no longer mutually exclusive ?

One other element of this section that I have identified as particularly important is a focus on celebrating the feminine energies of life. Though there are elements in this section that are celebratory of the masculine, I think that my inclination has been to focus on celebrating the feminine, to pay homage to the feminine spirit. In this light, the idea of the Orchard becomes a clearly feminine one -- the Orchard is a bower, a uterine paradise, worthy of poetic celebration. There is Persian/Urdu word, ghazal, which translates into English as "to converse with women". Though this word is usually applied to the singing of a specific style of love song, I think ghazal captures the soulfulness of my current endeavors. My take on it is a spirit of homage, of respect and care. The idea of an Orchard also implies gardening of some sort, of a gardener working and nurturing with diligence and care. The Orchard, the place of nourishment for the gardener, in turn requires nurturing from the gardener to continue providing the gardener with nourishment.

The poet is charged with singing of creation, celebrating it, even sometimes damning it. But always it must be spoken about. And in speaking about it, the poet is filled by it, even as he fills it. The poet as gardener: the poet's energies feed the vegetative splendor of this vast life by giving a voice to the beauty of his or her visions. The poet's passion for beauty and vitality procreates and gives the poet more to celebrate, more beauty, which gives the poet even more to celebrate, ad infinitum.

I think that Rilke writes with an intense charm that is a testament to poetic passion. It's genuine and humble, as if each poem was his last, and yet his urgency is controlled. As Robert Hass says in his introduction to Mitchell's collection of Rilke's work:

You feel a passion for someone so intense that the memory of their smell makes you dizzy and you would gladly throw yourself down the well of that other person, if the long hurtle in the darkness would then be perfect inside you....
(xxxv)

In loving, you must be accountable for a beautiful collapse of weight on the soul, the terrible burden of facing the finitude of human life and the uncertainty inherent in the call of the abyss. Your loved ones are the ones that trouble you the most, as you feel the helplessness of not being able to steer the inevitable away. Rilke, in the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets*, gives a voice to his burden. His lesson is that you must love so much that you love even the grief, and transform it with the heat of your exertions.

In William Gass' introduction to Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, I came across a sequence that fired off an epiphany for me. It regards an episode when Malte encounters some girls who have come to a museum to contemplate and sketch some unicorn tapestries on display.

These girls, before they have known the fat but actually fragile pleasures of the flesh, are able to lose themselves in their drawings for a moment; lose themselves, and thereby realize another kind of love: a love which allows them to take into an

almost unfolded soul, like a bee between hesitant petals, "the unalterable life that in these woven pictures has radiantly opened in front of them." (xix)

For the briefest of moments, as I sat in my study reading while my wife and daughter played in the living room, I felt that I understood the act of this love, its probing search on the interior. It was an act of radical humility, a suspension of logic. It was a moment of becoming aware that their lives could go on beyond me, that their worlds wouldn't end with mine.

Rilke's *New Poems* have been particularly impactful for me, because they seem to strike a very fine balance between having a great deal of well-crafted beauty, which came as a result of Rilke's maturing artistry, and relative clarity, which his later, more ambitious works lost to some degree as his poems became more closely akin to being "Mysteries", in the religious sense of the word.

Rilke has imparted to me the importance of creating a sincerely intimate relationship with the subject matter, to drive for that camaraderie. It is a camaraderie based on the sharing that occurs between poet and reader, and between poet and the subject itself. This train of thought led me to create *Portrait of Berthe Morisot Reclining, 1873*, for instance, which is concerned with the relationship that can and does exist between a person viewing a portrait and the subject of the portrait itself.

The idea of empathy drives the new poems, and I think that they represent a step into the next level of my development. My efforts will continue to be directed towards seeking out new influences to guide my imagination, but I have gained self-confidence in my work that encourages me to be more interactive with my contemporaries. I believe that I have reached a point where I need greater involvement with the current literary climate, participate in poetry readings, and make the effort to get published. If I am to continue growing as a poet and artist, then I feel that I need to take advantage of the social dynamic of interacting with other poets and artists, in order to challenge myself and to become more aware of the environment that I am a part of. However, as I

continue to grow as an artist, I know that I will also take Rilke, Yeats, Baudelaire, Byron and Neruda with me, as they have been key forces on my creative journey.

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SKELETONS AND RHINOCERI

IL PENSEROSO

I mourn the loss of my exuberance,
my stampeding, cloud-kicking runaways.
My pelt is hairy and covered with rents,
alone, left tending the weight of the days
that tramp the clay like heavy sleepwalkers.
I was a circus, a bowl of oceans,
lion-tamer unbound upon the world;
surfing the flood of games, dreams, and notions,
I hit the wave of adulthood unfurled
and was thrown to the carnival hawkers
of time. So now I look with dusky eyes
at days like scattered corn and empathize
with the boy whose hours, like cliff leaping trains,
were spent looking through daydream windowpanes.

TILL EULENSPIEGEL

The sunsoaked roar, of which I once was proud,
surreptitiously stole out a side door
put in by punctures and pockmarks of age,
leaving me a lion full of tapeworms,
a boob of nursing home-sized pretensions,
a forgotten name thing of my children.
I used to be a raffish bit of youth,
and the gleam of my feathers made the moon
giddy in a light kind of girlishness.
I was a man full of guff and courage!
Unable to maintain cool detachment
in the face of their cordial intentions,
out of boredom, I will tell the nurses
a hundred versions of this one story.

SOCRATES

Two blackbird shadows perched in my hands,
waiting for me to let them fly against the splash of sun,
so unexpectedly at ease with a hemlock sleeper,
that splash crawling briskly, suddenly through the window.
Impatient fingers ruffle their down, heads turn
to examine my digits with their nails cut too short,
a movement there and it would be broken.
Two dark passengers watching an unhurried stampede,
waiting for me to rein in the oxen before the valley,
what do they dread down there? Do they remember
a former life, a predatorial predawn, an engulfing overture?
I'm a little afraid. Do I tell them my hands can't move?
Letting my eyes close on themselves, I glimpse
the triumphant flutter of black and yellow wings.

GRAVEYARD AUBADE

Can you hear the day ending,
the strain in the voice of night
climbing awake
with children on her back?
So soon gone you will be,
you're knocking at the house of memory,
and won't I amplify my mistakes
in a questionable attempt
to drag you up from my heart and mind
to stand in front of me again?

Every one of us is self-contained.
A cathedral of exploding light, a brilliant shower,
a thousand momentary sensations
waving between eternal return and singular occurrence,
desperate to embrace the mumbling distances.

Our days together were like contraband oranges...
this beautiful happiness that we had no right to,
but seized anyway in youthful luxuriance.

And I can hear the day whisper quickly,
"So soon gone you will be,"
and I am picking stories
that I will tell of you
and laugh with a concealed sigh,
knowing they are not you,
pretending to ignore
the groan of sun drifting down.

CLANDESTINIES

1.

There's a name I wear on my foot
that only the earth can call me;
I step delicately through clay,
weary of the unsought indecencies of rain.

3.

Crushing my purple agony
with the slightest hint of foxglove,
she gave me no time to observe
the various blooms of her vanity table.

4.

You can hear the desert yawning
the sweetness of lethargia,
even as it digests the sun,
making rhythms out of insatiability.

6.

My eyelids open to a world,
in my disjointedness of self,
of resplendent fragments immersed
in the speed of Autumn racing against Winter.

7.

An intruding eye interrupts,
asking to be caught at seeking
aggressive receptivity,
but the sky rebuffs her terrestrial suitor.

8.

Light mostly saunters off the sun,
quite like you would remember it
if you were to remember it,
here among the silent parade of ground egos.

9.

To knit her the perfect lover,
from a worn and threadbare sweater,
her hands exhibit her troubles,
clumsily wielding darning needles of the soul.

11.

Her portrait has many voices,
strengthened by an unchanging pout:
they are falling tightrope walkers
praying an ear to seize them amidst their tumble.

19.

Have you ever wondered what sound
will be the last you hear on earth?
Some wish a cello, some gunshot;
I ask for a hush, to hear my wife breath my name.

22.

Please permit me to have the night,
for it's one of the few left me,
and I must gaze over my life
quickly, for I've no paint nor film to capture it.

23.

Chiseling rust from off the clouds
so as to help let the rain through,
he wished for a shower of growth,
not amused to find he needed a life jacket.

25.

Like cursed bluebirds fleeing the storm
that will suck color out of them,
let's you and I run the highway,
desperate to escape the mumblings within us.

26.

Privacy is expensive space:
outside these gates, philosophy
is ground into a topsoil,
smothering, turning against the seeds of selfhood.

28.

We conquer through the art of speed,
and this curse is most evident
throughout our sly dash of manhood,
where we've passed our women to pursue mannequins.

29.

Our native responses are lost,
giving right of way to ones left
by saints, puddles of rose petals
spoken not through mouths, but through the doorway of books.

32.

Whirling eddies of knowledge call,
yet still fear I: the liquid deep,
dark waters that do not mirror,
rolling tides that crush the captor, and burst the cage.

33.

He speaks with elasticity
but his heart is diaphanous,
as though a naked skywriter
lost in mid-flight in the labyrinth of his throat.

34.

I've got a gripper on my heart-
could lovefall for a woman's voice
if I hadn't clogged up my ears
with the detested sermons of my own murder.

35.

Cupping wild swans in my hands
would be the nearest thing, might be
the only thing, if ever asked,
of how I could tell them about holding you to.

37.

My lips, down the small of her back,
tumble and cartwheel like French mimes
hesitating with drunkenness,
windwalkers teased on by the dreams of transgression.

38.

If I do not walk fast enough
shadows have a chance to catch me,
and though my feet are quite tired,
there's terror in my eyes at the mention of rest.

43.

Chew, chew, chewing on angel wings,
you try to gnaw them off your back,
hoping the new wounds scar quickly
else you gain two mouths from which you accuse yourself.

44.

Your shadow is equal to you
as the rocky depths are equal
to the soundings of passing ships
searching for dangerous nasties hiding below.

46.

Lionize your environment,
and leave a vacuum in your wake,
making them who will hunger you
feel your absence as a hippopotamus bite.

48.

There is bravery to know fear
is in your box of emotions
and still to pull the lid, to see
it peek up at you every time you open it.

50.

Afraid of what I might write down
were I to unbutton my soul,
I choke on the thickness of fear,
punishing the drunken centurion inside.

53.

A life spent apologizing,
of looking over your shoulder,
draws out certain epiphanies
that you, ventriloquist doll, had best not squander.

54.

And after the night spent wanting,
tucking in the folds of shadow,
stammering through indecisions,
blue faced impulse ran through my gills, and I kissed her.

55.

I felt the sky to find it glass,
to sense its want to limit mind,
its heavy gluttony of clouds;
and then, I was shown night laden with her children.

56.

My kiss is proud. It has worked hard,
winding through slipp'ry strategies
and cutting smooth, unbridled words,
the tender survivor of full, torrid cascades.

62.

Propensities for honesty
usually burden their owners,
is too often again proven,
with the company of sullen acclaimators.

64.

Cup to lip, cup to lip, rising,
you could choke on the decadence
wafting obsession through the air
as you impugn the wickedness of impressions.

69.

The happiest man in the world
is the funniest man alive
as pain is wrung through his humor,
and in its twisting we see him born once again.

71.

On the day your shadow grew long
you were celebrating your age,
and on turning back to call you
something paused my voice, ere I disturbed the sleepers.

72.

We've told the world that human flesh
is forbidden to feed upon,
and most animals believe it,
but humans aren't convinced, who gorge on it daily.

75.

Why does man dream of rivers? Why?
What dark hilarity flows there,
laughter granting no clemency,
what crowd is played to by that bleak sense of humor?

76.

Let's call it joyous frustration,
that delightful obedience
to the spots of tarnish we find
spoiling our chain links, a sin which enamors us.

77.

Let me walk under the shade there,
wildly veering from my path
to accomplish my end of things,
as necessary to catch the falling moments.

83.

Bashful trumpeter, find your hot
and cold, let the midnight spill, flow
from your horn, repeal your habits
old and true, discover aching, and exploit it.

85.

Imagination is a sky
bloated with dogfighting biplanes,
juggernauts of desire scorned,
caught in the attrition of soul-searching ethics.

86.

What dark grace does she not exude?
Gauguin's "Woman with a Mango"
is her only competition,
Pre-Raphaelite reggae spilling from them both.

90.

I am in trouble with the earth,
an escaped dead man on the run.
The hard earned fruits of my labor
were bitter in the fields of my immigration.

91.

The house is quiet without you,
quiet enough that I can hear
the steel softness of your absence
whistling to itself, goading me with its echo.

93.

Fall's thick fingers tap on my mind,
illustratingly rhythmical,
drumming home important whispers
that bounce around inside about the coming sleep.

94.

We are all just Gordian knots,
and we're afraid of clumsy hands
that, in seeking to unwind us,
employ the razor's method and succeed, but don't.

95.

Beauty sows its own corruption,
a marriage of delicacy
and decrepitude is its form;
some flee its horror, others worship, none ignore.

97.

The Tempter's voice is the blank page
calling the rebellious child,
enticing him to mar and scratch,
to share the Bible's irony: language is sin.

100.

Voiceprints mark and burn responses
to challenges not yet with us;
such are the signatures of wit.
We adopt mockingbird postures in our contempt.

103.

Remorseful villain, hold your tongue!
Your confessions are ill suited,
and mangle the expectations
that we've built for you: blemish free and in control.

104.

"Soy el tigre! Soy el tigre!"
(I hear a voice call from my chest)
"Soy el tigre. Soy el tigre."
Listen. I think I can hear it dying away.

GRAFFITI IN THE ORCHARD

ALEKSEI'S WALK

Seventeen orbits in utero floating,
instrumentational ping and piped in Russian
voices worn thin with *Pushki* tobacco,
and a modest door that will open, deliberately.

In your immigration of languid effervescence,
navigating the freefall, trembling,
the *Voskhod* parked terribly unreal beneath you...

did you hear the Nekrasov Cossacks sing of Sadko
while Pavel, your twin, the monitor of umbilical tethers,
measured out cadenced responses
to the detached mother impossibly below?

And like the Cossacks' hero, you gambled on a new cradle,
journeying from the Wild Field to a monarch's court,
this time redefining human citizenship
far above the blissful sea indomitable.
But where was the tsarevna
for you here in the chaos, ready with solar embraces?

Fugitive in the imminent composure raven and inarticulate,
with no sovereign daughter to solicit on your behalf,
could any inoculation for this humiliating serenity
be found amid the souvenirs of memory?
Do we bring them with us out here?

The night sky is filled with tigers on fire,
seraphs ambling, clustered and aroused who,
though promising out infinite fearsome shimmers,
quietly shed the light that follows assuredly
the glissading owl and her spry prey
spiraling in the dusky crisis.
Theirs may be a gospel whose music we see,
but are not meant to hear.

How terrestrial of us to take this terror for granted,
but how few would really trade up for the black glass,
most in want of your buoyant, matter-of-fact bravery.

It is a somnambulist's job
to serenade these empty streets
in whispers and inconsistencies,

shouldering the weight of an old and new madrigal,
"Laborare est orare....,"
nearing fainty-eyed desperation
to capture all in this ten minute avenue.

What is a night?
A time for jubilant indignation,
avowing that spatial waves wash and overcome you,
threatening seasickness or worse,
where sunfish distant vitalize the sky
with exhalations pushed through celestial gills,
subatomic hastening through waves
immense and charmingly unforgiving.
In the face of such silences,
it is to be blessedly expected to lose hope,
only that you may measure it more truly
when your nets pull it back in from the sea.

DAVID CRONENBERG

Lay quiet, they're dreaming.
If you keep still, I'll open my briefcase.
I'll pull out some files,
saunter through my notes,
look around a bit.
If you can listen
around the buzzing neon signs
and through the pack of groans
that caper in the downtown winds,
allowing this request,
I'll look into it for you.

Streaking swollen fingers
across the transparent boundaries
between dream and reflection,
it's a simple matter
to smudge the distinctions,
and the careless artist
will find his prints trace their author.

The ritual is the standard.
Let the night swallow them in gasps
of yearning for blue skies and innocence.
Let solvents disguise the rapist.
Let this misunderstood salesman
skate the gridwork of violin strings
that binds the human emotion.
Let him tick middle class catastrophe
on a wristwatch, and then rush in.

Before I place you, stand back.
Some beauty should never be gazed upon.
Even I must roll my eyes,
and sweat through the cut,
hoping I don't spy the photos in their heart.

Will you know yourself when you are yourself?
When you stretch the new heart
with a love like polished bone,
and your extravagant compulsions, like oiled bricks,
have a cascading love of gravity,
urging them to plunge from some great height
to the wet slap that awaits them below,

remember you can slip, you can slip,
you can be thrown from the horse.

And so let us close the suture.
In learning to define your new obsession,
it's the ability to stay ahead of disgust
that presents us with Heaven.

THE BACCHANATES

Waiting in the blue Thracian woods now,
done past all waiting, actually,
they are coming, you know,
cloned, warmly mouth-watering bodies, writhing
eternal smiles mercilessly tantalized,
sacred panthers lunar and blue
prowling erotic-teased dramas sanctified.

Charged on bliss, for you
on soft paws through the forest they arrive,
voicing uterine war chants.
They will draw forth the waters from your body,
hands fanning out, a sudden seizure
and your robes and corpuscles are compromised.
Innumerable to the waters of Meles you will go,
still singing.

The cunning flavor in their music kindles you on,
unforgiving notes that will not stand down,
and not even the temple deep in their ears
can save you now, beautiful boy.

Your groin clenches,
it's knowing they will purge the impatient time
that cost you so much in the fantasy of a possessible wife,
now in the ecstasy.
Accounts spell their devotion as carnage unappeasable,
but the truth is really the soft paws.

You must answer these women, and you will,
you who were so filled heavily with your pollinating song
that you would lament the Sleeper out of her retightened innocence.
Bartering for her by bathing the Pale Lord in sound,
the pilgrimage low in the throat only
washed you naked of your vanity, sincerity.

Before they take you and possess you,
will you have that fleeting moment you fear the most,
the utter lostness you always hunted for in your work,
of not knowing who you felt the most strongly for,
or who felt the most strongly for you, They or She?

PORTRAIT OF BERTHE MORISOT RECLINING, 1873

At first glance,
the lighting suggests a small candle
flickering just over his right shoulder
while you sat there, struggling to sit still.
Casually I wonder, is she bored,
petulant, curious? Were they late somewhere?
Or did you sit again in the Garden,
resting in the oblivious?

My initial learned response is to break you down:
the emanation of light from your skin,
the tender cascade of hair falling with sensuous abandon
around a listening and attentive ear, around eyes
that embrace the most aching expanses inside.

Moving softly through the dusky, wistful music of your portrait,
following you to the Secret World, I am overcome by deep intimacy
and the awareness of you.

Little Berthe,
we are exhilaratingly, terrifying alone here,
like frozen falling tightrope walkers
trapped in a stumble. A quick glance around
our secret reveals it: Manet is not here.

We alone are accountable now,
as I draw closer to you
and am excited by the flame of your drawing close,
the You resonating so strongly through me,
fanning out with a slow, joyous flippancy,
encroaching cardinal robes of human spirit innumerable and multiplying.

Let us be lessons to the larger family.

I open to you, you are more to me,
the You emanating, your human-ness, bravely venturing out.
Vibrating through with courage,
beyond the brush strokes, artistic intentions, cultural accolades.
What does all that mean to us, anyhow, in the face of the gift you bring,
and leave me with?... a momentary freedom from grief.

FOR WARIS HIRSI

Her face is an immediate
lasting celebration,
coming at you from within
the supple angles of her headdress.
Her softness and beauty
have been baked into her by
the hot suns of famine
and the vibrant ovens
of ardor and devotion in a time
of manufactured cruelty.

To know her is to hear
the purple woman tangled in her ribs
whisper to her circumstances,
“My eyes have unmasked your approaches,
yet still I tread your delicate terrestrium
with a buoyant swirl.
I am not afraid.”

*She was away from her home,
celebrating the candlelit conclusion
of Ramadan with her six children
when the burglars, the new ones, broke in.
Stealing the zakat charity fund
she had been chosen to supervise,
the new ones walked in echoed quietness.*

To know her is to hear
her part in the story,
though her mouth remains silent.
You meet her and you hear
the story in her face,
eyes like contradictions
of gracious smoldering,
telling you all you will be told.
To know her is to hear.

*The even more cruel reward
was the taking of her mother's jewelry, -
her inheritance intact and previously unassailable -
orphaning her from the linking tactile presence
of her mother and all her previous females.*

*Not but a few years before,
she must have heard
her original mothers,
in Somalian whispers contraband,
compassionately urging,*

*"...Flee south,
flee with your children
and your mother's heirlooms,
flee the starvation and
the cruel lamentable ones
who harvest husbands and brothers,
flee..."*

*During four years
at a Kenyan refugee camp,
she refused to exchange
her jeweled travelers of the female line
for any momentary tranquillities,
knowing their radiance
teemed with a family's recounting.*

So now, she is faced with this new famine,
this new civil war.
Her beauty is unsuited for rage or despair;
understandable to mistake
her resolve for serenity.

THE GOLEM

The Vltava is always there,
almost talking to herself
with a voice like the silver wheat
that Ophelia could not deny,
somehow a part of everything
that goes on in the city.

The night the rabbi comes
to pull mud from her banks,
forming it into hands, legs, head, torso,
and especially a throat,
where the name of God will be lodged
like an indescribably exhilarated virus,
she will not be surprised, this river, she who has
embraced and progenerated
each spire and stony saint risen from the architecture
with an upright and inward expectancy,
tranquil, embellished contrasts,
the Christian violence harassing the Ghetto.

It is a night that the rabbi will open the Sefer Yetzirah
and will read aloud the things he has kept silent.
The mud, which has no ears, will hear.
The mud, which has no tongue, will reply,
and the rabbi will dialogue with the river and the mud.

*I call you back from the water,
ebony flame like a Queen of the Night Tulip,
dyed by the charm of abandon withdrawn
into your deepest navel and spreading
out again, awaiting some never-forgotten
rain, a soft voice, encouraging your earliest efflorescence:
how so finally close to you that rain
must have come, your emotions
so vigorously subdued, readying
for the unflex of physical memories
from before you, to stretch and expand
beyond your modestly self-imagined
boundaries. So full with possibility,
so ready to harbor the pollen grains
of Yahweh's voice with all the delicate
courtesy of your gynoecium.*

The mud will speak and move, and will do more.
It will walk and take a name,
a name that it will know as its own
and which only it can hear. The rabbi will speak
that name and the mud will reply.

*And then, that first instant, when you are
smoothly let go, when the sky unblemishes
and you are left, crisp and bewildered
by the momentary hush, overcome
by your newfound fullness. The day breaks
and the shuffle of light begins,
solar pulses caressing, whirling,
seizing you in the glory of their
animated combustion, electric
chlorophyll rifling you through, the swollen bliss
of carpels luxuriating
in the inarticulate experience.*

The mud will outwit the blackbirds pecking at the cobblestones
of Prague's streets, child murderers and blood libelers,
turning their monstrous ways back on themselves.
They will roar out for celestial forgiveness,
and the common share will remind them, with great clarity,
of the gentle saturation within all flesh.

This mud will eventually return to the river,
and will refrain from speaking and hearing,
but it will still be in dialogue. The rabbi will hear
and other, later rabbis will hear. The mud,
which has no name now, will have a name
and when it will have a name,
there will be others who hear it
like a recurring memory of water.

*Before spring dwindles down into summer's
slow and drowsy cascade of time-ignorant heat,
when the alphabet of foliage collapsing
insubstantially into the weight
of your bulb surprises you
with the discombobulation of their
wet sentences divine, share with me
quickly one final geitonogamous
dream, return to me, return to me...*

HANNAH'S PAINTING SHIRT

As she works her brushes,
streaking gelatinous colors
into the familiar exotic language of youth,
she stops occasionally to stretch out,
learning to aviate within it.

It vacillates between
a timeless, gracefully hydrozoan dance
and a guardian clinging seeking calling forth
the attractiveness of her personal approach.

The shirt, a castoff from her grandfather,
once a dated snare of mercantile energy,
now a generator of declarations seemingly inarticulate,
safekeeps, perhaps unwitting,
but only perhaps,
the innocent sensuality
that will one day be her mother's.

The finishing touch?
The sleeves. Rolled comical donuts
hanging off her delicate wrists,
counterpoints punctuating
the mass of spiritual swirling about her
with childhood's ferocious heroism.

IPHIGENIA

Children's voices surround me,
pinching with the fingers of memory,
and I recall your summer face.
In shame I crimson
as if slapped by the wings of a cardinal,
and remember a youthful pride
in an eloquence of persuasion.
Such a hurry to kill young men,
to regain a wife, to escape
the boredom of the calm way,
like the calm of Aulis,
and the blood in our bodies
of so long ago was not the blood
that is driven now by slowed pulses
to the face of the old and breathless.

You are a terrible breeze,
haunting my wheatfields
like a kiss blown in the face of death.

In the quieter moments of an old man's life,
when he can reflect and regret
with the same careless abandon
as the young when with their friends,
I can see clearly with a father's eyes
a day too large to bury, and I,
I am floored
by the brilliant shine,
foolishly repeating my vain search
for curtains to wrap it up in.

And so I spend my days
in the blown glass luxury
of this degraded aristocracy
and talk to the distant neighbors
I've accumulated.

SILENT FILM

They wait with impossible patience in a can
for the lightstorm to kick in, while the Charonic
projector, stretching his arms and cracking his knuckles,
coughing once over some technical
headscratcher, makes his adjustments and locks
the reels in place, pausing
for a moment to pick
a piece of lint from his Christmas herringbone tie,
he, too, trapped in his own little darkened room.

Each acetate cell, quiet in a way
we don't understand quiet, unceasingly ready
to pass before the gate where a shutter
revolving somewhere briefly releases
the momentary bombardment
of electric Shiva's dance, each cell
has an obligation to rumple
sensuously the surface of our
perceptions with *their* story.

The *He* of our story, our Valentino,
must always remember the first
moment of *Her* smiling of the infinite
sun internal, smiling, always smiling so
smooth, always on the verge of real sound
from deep within her explorer's costume glamorized,
a hidden emotional vocabulary
masquerading in screen actress posturings,
one he only has come to know through repeated viewings:
the passion of sweet, lethargic insatiability,
the petulant (and much deeper, real) despair,
the languid self-assurance that he will
get them out of their predicament, one day.
Then they will take charge of new movements
and loving gestures, even angry or sad ones,
just free to make and discover sounds at last,
all the words they have longed to give one
another and everything they've always wanted
to hear for themselves.

If just one sound could penetrate the absolute seal,
imagine what it's distinctness might mean
to them, they who search so earnestly for some

tangibility to stretch their imaginations on.
Perhaps the sonic waves of a ghazal playing out
like an infinite unravel of commingled DNA,
or something as whispery and cherished
as the clothes of her only he can hear.

The long dead actors they were once tied to
have crawled out of them like homeless ghosts,
ignorant of captured lives forced into static
perpetuity, or even maybe only too
aware of the bondage of the role,
they, trapped too in a way, always
fleeing for other roles, other lives
later abandoned, episodic shelters
fused into one long chrysalis highway of eternal return.

Watching the Bedouin and his Girl in the Pith Helmet, though,
reading each other's heavy grease paint lids,
hands and bodies moving with gentle physical
diplomacy, kisses like summer birds dissipating
in the drowsy fiction, envy sets in, an envy that
Dante must have felt, regardless of the moral lesson,
when the winds grew calm and Paolo and Francesca
drew near him in the glory and scent of their soft heat.

How could there be a greater reward than these
bruised lips in motion brushing up against
a fevered belief in tomorrows,
so burdened by their passion as to be rubbed
into blissful transparency, making a stand
in the face of the clouds that never move on,
little fat children, lazy and sluggish,
muffling the deepened desert sky?

In the Bedouin's eyes, the faith for both
of them is there: "We must not let
the human heart know what a fragile
little wingless animal it is,
for only its illusions about
this world can master the sudden turns."

Once we join them, it is easy to be
flattered by our association,
charmed by the almost fragrant caresses
on screen, even more pure in their silence,

so effortless to blend with their lives,
and yet how easy for us to leave them again,
without hesitation or the slightest remorse.
Don't be fooled, they do feel it deeply.

CECILY BROWN

She approaches each canvas with graceful intentions pornographic,
control, a delirious lack of dignity,
each taut skin punctuated with an oily blend
of strange directions in subliminal languages.

Her brush crawls swollen and most delicately outraged,
exhaling a stream of physical insubordinations
like liquid hummingbirds brutally, tenderly crushed in a vise and splattered,
without apology, through the funnel approaching the uncontrollably pure.
Nagging accusations of abstraction plague her style,
not entirely without merit, but her point is never in doubt.

Spiced on the heat and excitement,
casual observers of her work may fail to ask,
"Who were they, they robbed of a function of the deep person,
unwitting totemic cave legends, suffering a provocation
even more personal than the average skin film larceny?
They whose genitals have been mischievously
borrowed as to put all surgeons into professional despair,
perhaps donated playfully, or pulled from memory,
blended by her hand into a hot, mocking redemption,
and yet, somehow, the work speaks..."

"Who were they?" is the only accusation she may deign to answer;
outside her work, we have our own imputations to frustrate around,
drawing warmth from her in our discussions.

NOTES

Aleksei's Walk

Voskhod - During the seventeen orbit flight of the Voskhod 2 (March 18, 1965), Aleksei Leonov became the first human to walk in space, spending ten minutes outside his spacecraft. His co-pilot was Pavel Belyayev.

Sadko - The Nekrasov Cossacks of Northern Russia have an epic song about a hero named Sadko. "Sadko, a merchant from Novgorod, falls in love with the daughter of the Tsar of the sea and journeys beneath the ocean to live with his beloved. Homesick for Novgorod he returns and in order to join him she turns herself into a river to run through the centre of Novgorod." - courtesy of Abigail Adams and Dmitri Pokrovsky. (see Adams and Pokrovsky citation in Reference section)

Tsarevna - Russian; daughter of a Tsar.

Laborare est orare - Latin; "To labor is to pray".

The Bacchanates

Meles - River in Asia Minor; in the Orpheus legend, his remains were disposed of in the river by the women of Thrace.

Cecily Brown

Cecily Brown - (b. 1969) an English painter residing in New York City, known for her use of abstracted male and female genitalia for startling visual effect in her paintings.

For Waris Hirsi

Ramadan - Holy month of fasting ordained by the Koran for all adult Muslims.

Zakat - A charity fund set up for the less fortunate of a community; Muslims have a holy obligation to contribute to it.

The Golem

Vltava - River that runs through the heart of the city of Prague.

Sefer Yetzirah - Mystical Hassidic prayer book.

Gynoecium - Innermost whorl of a flower; contains one or more carpels (see Carpals below).

Carpals - Female reproductive organs of a flower, containing at least one placenta to which are attached ovules, or immature seeds.

Geitonogamous - Transfer of pollen from one flower to another on the same plant.

Il Penseroso

Il Penseroso - Italian; "the pensive man".

Iphigenia

Iphigenia - daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

Aulis - Site of a prolonged weather calm, under the influence of Artemis, which prevented the Achaean fleet from sailing to Troy at the outset of the Trojan War. The

fleet was finally allowed to set sail after Agamemnon agreed to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis.

Silent Film

Ghazal - Arabic; "To converse with women"; a Middle Eastern (originally Persian) love song form that functions as a musical dialogue between "beauty" and "love". (see Garrett and Cheng citation in Reference section)

Paolo and Francesca - A famous pair of adulterous lovers who were killed by Paolo's brother and Francesca's husband, Giovanni the Lamb, sometime between the years 1283 and 1286. Dante uses them in the Second Circle of the Inferno to illustrate the misfortunes of illicit love (love turned away from a focus on God), but over the years, popular imagination romanticized them into a status rivaling Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolde. (see Ciardi citation in Reference section)

Till Eulenspiegel

Till Eulenspiegel - A German fairy tale hero. Till was a clownish peasant who would outwit the various educated and well-to-do people of his town in order to humble them for their conceitedness.